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AUTHOR Halmari, Helena
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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that linguistic competence depends ultimately on knowledge of the culturally determined norms of language use, this paper focuses on the way business-related telephone conversations between Finns and Anglo-Americans are organized, with special attention to differences in the way the opening "How are you?" sequence is understood by each culture. The subject is examined in terms of the "episode structure" developed by J. Neu (1985). In business conversations, there are three basic episodes: opening (some sort of greeting); business (main topic with optional side sequences); and closing (which may include a recapitulation of what was decided in the business episode). It is in the non-topical sequence that follows the opening that Finnish and Anglo-American expectations differ most, with the Finns understanding the initial "How are you?" as a genuine question and replying accordingly and the Anglo-Americans expecting only the briefest formality before starting in on the "business episode." It is concluded that organizing conversations according to mutual expectations would facilitate the flow of communication in international encounters. (Contains 15 references.) (LR)

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The Organization of Episode Structure in Finnish/Finnish and Finnish/Anglo-American Business Telephone Conversations: An Intercultural Perspective

by

Helena Halmari
University of Southern California
and
University of California, San Diego

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We are so used to the way we are used to doing things that it is easy to forget that not everybody does things in our way. We take it for granted that when we are speaking a language foreign to us, we use the words of that language, we use its morphology and syntax, and we try to adhere, as well as we can, to the phonological system of that language. At the level of a sentence, we may be able to form native-speaker-like, fully grammatical speech. However, when looking at larger chunks of discourse--outside the level of the sentence--something may go wrong. Linguistic competence does not guarantee communicative competence, knowledge of the culturally determined social norms of language use (see Hymes 1971, 1972). As Rapila (1993:220) puts it: "[T]he speaker has to be able to produce utterances which conform to the situational constraints which are appropriate in a given situation" (see also Gumperz 1982). Lack of knowledge about the conventions of how larger chunks of discourse are organized, may create more confusion in our communicative attempts than an occasional misplaced adverbial phrase, a forgotten agreement marker, or a self-made past tense form. A foreigner is expected to make grammatical errors, and

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speak with an accent; these things are not counted against him/her. However, if a person speaks your language, this person is expected to play by your rules, and if anyone breaks the cultural rules of discourse organization, this is not forgiven as part of being a foreigner. The rule-breaker is regarded as strange.

I was recently reminded about the cultural differences in discourse organization, so deeply rooted in our behavior. After five years in California I certainly **knew** that it is not customary to introduce oneself when, for instance, ordering a pizza; however, that was exactly what I did, since, together with other Finns, I have graduated from the kindergarten telephone training course where, using toy phones, we practiced introducing ourselves both when answering the phone, and when calling someone (example 1)[1]:

(1) 1 Pizza deliverer: D n' N Pizza?
2 H. H. : This is H. H., hi.
3 Pizza deliverer: WHAT was your name?
4 H. H. : (annoyed) H. H.
5 Pizza deliverer: (annoyed) Why do I wanna know your
6 name?

Starting from my first turn (line 2), the whole telephone conversation went wrong. The pizza deliverer was expecting me

[1]Hakulinen (1993:163) points out that in the Finnish culture "[m]entioning one's name as caller is highly favoured."

to give my order right away; the fact that I first gave my name made him think that he for some reason needs to know it (maybe I had called before and left an order, or he should have known what my call is about just by hearing my name). My expectations about what the interlocutor should say after my introduction were not fulfilled either. I was expecting the person to say something like "Hi, how could I help you?" or "Hi, what kind of pizza would you like?" The fact that he focused on my name made me realize that once again I had broken the cultural expectations, and the fact that the pizza deliverer broke my cultural expectations by starting to question my introduction and by not taking my order right away led to a nasty turn in the conversation where we both ended up accusing each other for being rude, and I ended up ordering my pizza from elsewhere. I did call back, however, and both of us apologized, but if this pizza deliverer had ever had negative thoughts of foreigners, those stereotypes certainly became stronger. For my part I promised to try and learn my lesson: including one's name is not a part of the opening episode when ordering pizza by phone in the United States.

In the present paper, I will focus on the organization of more serious business related telephone conversations, and especially one notable difference in how the so-called 'how are you?' -sequence is understood by the Finns on the one hand, and by Anglo-Americans on the other (cf. Hakulinen 1993). First,

however, I will briefly summarize the features of business telephone conversations that seem to be shared by both cultures. My Finnish/Finnish and Finnish/American data come from recorded telephone conversation of a Finnish businessman who deals both with Finns and Americans (Halmari 1993). My English/English data come from the University of Texas Conversation Library[2]. In all the conversations in the data both calling parties know each other (whether the calling parties know each other or not is naturally an important variable determining the shape of the conversations). I am careful about making generalizations; however, based on the data so far, it seems to be safe to say that certain features are shared both by the Finnish and by the Anglo-American culture, and certain features seem to be more typical of one of the cultures than of the other. Rapila (1993) has identified clear communication difficulties which may arise from the fact that in the business telephone conversations which she studied, Finns, for instance, supplied less back-channeling during the conversations than was expected by the British interlocutors, and I have shown elsewhere (Halmari 1993:425) that in business telephone conversations, native speakers of Finnish initiate overlapping talk more than three times less often than Anglo-

[2]I am indebted to Robert Hopper, University of Texas Conversation Library, Speech Department, UT Austin, TX 78712, for making the tapes and transcripts available to me.

Americans. Thus, there might be some truth to the picture, painted by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985:196), of the Finn as the "'silent' listener" (cf. also Graham 1990:258-259; Scollon & Scollon 1981). However, as we will see, the Finn may also surprise the American in quite a different way.

I look at business-related telephone conversations in terms of the episode structure--a framework developed by Neu in her dissertation (1985). In the speech event 'negotiation,' Neu identifies functionally and/or structurally definable intermediate units, which she calls episodes, and it seems that the basic episode structure, identified by Neu in the simulated negotiation games which she studied, is shared by business telephone calls cross-culturally. What makes the study of Finnish and Anglo-American telephone conversations quite interesting is the fact that there seems to be slight differences, first, in which episodes get emphasized and, second, in what the contents of each episode is expected to be.

Table 1 shows the basic episode structure of business telephone conversations (cf. Halmari 1993:412-413). Naturally, in business telephone conversations there needs to be an **opening episode**, a **business episode**, and a **close episode**. In Table 1, the optional episodes or subepisodes are those in parentheses. The opening episode can consist of an introduction, when the calling parties explicitly introduce

	FINNISH	ENGLISH
OPENING	X	X
(Introduction)		
Greeting		
(Limited answer to 'How are you?')		(X)
(NON-TOPICAL)	(X)	
(Extended answer to 'How are you?')		
(Lightening/Joke)		
BUSINESS	X	X
Business initiation		
(Side sequences)		
CLOSE	X	X
(Pre-close/Lightening/Joke)		
(Recapitulation)		
Close initiation		
Formal closing		

Table 1. The episode structure of business telephone conversations. (Optional episodes/subepisodes are in parentheses.)

themselves, and there tends to be a greeting of some sort[3]. The business episode consists of obligatory business initiation, and optional side sequences. The closing episode may include a pre-close, often in the form a lightening, a recapitulation of what has just been agreed in the business episode, and an obligatory close initiation (e.g. 'okay') and a formal closing (e.g. 'good-bye') (see Schegloff & Sacks 1973; Halmari 1993).

The non-topical sequence is not obligatory, and it seems that there are not only individual, but also cultural

[3]For a detailed account on Anglo-American openings, see Schegloff 1968/89; for Finnish openings, see Hakulinen 1993.

differences in how the non-topical episode--which follows the opening episode and precedes the business episode--is realized and how important this non-topical sequence is. Graham and Herberger (1983:163) have claimed that Anglo-American business people "want to get to the heart of the matter quickly." However, based on the thirty American conversations that form part of my data, I claim that Americans do get engaged in non-topical sequences before the business as well. Getting directly to business is, however, quite common in the American business conversations, as example (2) indicates:

(2)
```
1  LAR: This Larry
             (0.3)
2  RED: Hiya Larry this Red
3  LAR: Hey, Red How ARe ya.
             (.)
4  RED: Pretty good, how you doin hh
5  LAR: A:h just wonderful
→ 6       (0.3) X C twenty nine, (0.2)
7  RED: X C twenty ni:ne. O:kay, you wanna a::d the P
       ter::m for hh h
                  (UTCL J20a.1 Pac Bell 11 (Wrobbel))
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Business is here initiated on line 6 without any non-topical sequence. This example, however, is also an illustration of the 'how are you?' -sequence, on which I will now focus. I argue that lines 1-5 which in example (2) precede the initiation of business all belong to the opening sequence, and the non-topical sequence is here missing altogether. The opening here includes an introduction (both mention their names), greeting

("Hiya," "Hey"), and a brief 'how are you?' -sequence, here part the greeting. The answers that are both expected and given to 'how are you?' are brief--here: "Pretty good" and "A:h just wonderful." The 'how are you?' -sequence is realized as a question; however, a real answer is not often expected to be given.

As Graham (1980, cited in Neu 1985:45) suggests, there is cultural variation in which episodes of business negotiation are regarded as more important. I would, however, like to claim that the importance of the non-topical episode may differ, not necessarily so much depending on the culture, but depending on the nature of the call. For instance, if the reason for calling is something unpleasant, the non-topical is an important section before tackling the serious (unpleasant) business. It, in a way, seems to soften the ground for what will follow in the business episode. Example (3) from a conversation where both parties are Finnish, illustrates the non-topical sequence, which precedes the business--an inquiry about a payment that the caller had not received:

(3) 1 A: Mitä Askolle kuuluu?
(How is Asko? (=How are you, Asko?))
2 B: No ei tässä .. ihmeempiä. Ihmeempiä.
(Well nothing here .. more extraordinary. More extraordinary.)
3 Entä sinne.
(And there?)
4 A: No ei täällä kanssa
5 täällon KUUma ja ... tukala olla

6 täällon semmosta ylitte .. neljääkymmentä ollut
7 nytte pitkään.
(Well, nothing here either. It's HOT and .. stuffy. It's been like over .. forty degrees now for a long time.)
8 B: Älä. Ai siellon niin .. kuivat kelit.
9 Täällon täällon on tota
10 vähän on niinkun viilenny.
11 On tääl nyt semmosta yheksääkymmentä.
(Oh. It has been so .. dry over there. Here it's been well like a little bit cooler. Something like ninety.)
12 A: Juu.
(Yeah.)
13 B: Kosteus on vaan niin pirun korkee.
(It's just so damn humid.)
14 A: hhh. Kuule tota nin.
(Well, listen.)

(Halmari 1993:415)

The non-topical sequence in example (3) is introduced by the Finnish question 'How is it going?'/'How are you?' on line 1. The 'how are you?' -sequence, so often present in native-speaker Anglo-American business telephone conversations, is, I claim, **not** a part of the Finnish opening episode. If the 'how are you?' -sequence is present, it is understood as a genuine question, triggering a non-topical episode (Halmari 1993). In example (3) both parties engage in truly answering how they are, and both parties are engaged in the creation of the non-topical episode to an equal degree[4].

In the Finnish non-topical sequence, the weather is not the only possible topic for the non-topical; any type of light

[4]I am grateful to Edward Finegan for drawing my attention to this.

sequence is happily added right before tackling the core business. I do not want to claim that it is not important in Anglo-American conversations as well, but the fact that it is important in the Finnish conversations will be crucial here[5].

There are no drastic intercultural differences in the structure of the business telephone conversations in the Finnish and in the Anglo-American culture. However, a minor difference, namely the fact that the 'how are you?' -sequence is understood differently creates a potential for intercultural miscommunication. The 'how are you?' -sequence in the American business conversations can only trigger a limited answer (e.g. 'Fine, thanks,' 'Pretty good,' 'Not bad'), and it is thus interpreted as a routine part of the opening episode (see Schegloff 1968/1989). In the Finnish conversations, the 'how are you?' -sequence is rarely present (Hakulinen 1993:157), and when it is present, it is interpreted as an invitation to talk about something else than what the call is going to concern. When an American says 'How are you?' he/she expects a fairly short answer, and expects to move on to the business episode rapidly; for the Finn, 'How are you?' is an overt permission to

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[5]For interesting alternative findings in business conversations, see Aaltonen et al. 1991. Their studies showed that the "openings tended to be too direct as the Finnish speakers did not voluntarily introduce any small talk" (1991:115). I claim that no matter what the realization of the 'conversational error' is (i.e. whether an episode is too long, too short, consists of wrong content, or is missing altogether), problems may arise whenever the expectations of the conversational partner are not fulfilled.

talk about something other than business. Example (4) (from Halmari 1993) is an illustration of what happened when the American businessman asked his Finnish business partner the innocent question 'how are you?' (A is the American and F is the Finn):

(4) A: Okay. How are you doing today?
F: I'm real bad. I was so- w- we have been SO angry with my wife because we have problems with the computer.
A: (laughs) hah-hah-hah-hah-ha!
F: You don't believe how how these people how they are- er they are sending us to four different companies. I never buy an EB- IBM any more.
A: Oh REALLY?
F: Yeah.
A: You have a big problem with your IBM?
F: Ye:s
A: How funny.
F: Yeah and I think that it is the basically that the first guy who sold it to us he put the wrong serial number in the guarantee papers.
A: O:h.
F: We have a warranty on it but the serial number is different. He has made a m- smesh to us and it's going to cost almost two thousand DOLLARS.
A: Oh N:O!
F: So I'm pissed.
A: I- I would be very pissed too hah[-hah!
F: [Yeah.
A: O:h what an awful thing that's that's a lot of cars you have to sell.
F: Yeah. I have to ship a many many many cars.
A: That's a lot of cars for a lousy computer.
F: Yes (laughs)
A: Same for me too.
F: Oh?
A: SO. I'm returning your call regarding a RATE that you want.

(Halmari 1993:416-417)

Example (4) illustrates how the Finnish interlocutor (F) takes the 'how are you?' -question as a real question, does not answer it according to conventions, but answers it literally. This type of non-topical sequence would be acceptable in his business culture; in fact the non-topical sequences in the Finnish conversations where both partners know each other tend to be more or less elaborated accounts of what is going on in the lives of both interlocutors, and both interlocutors contribute to the building of the non-topical sequence. The fact that something has gone wrong in example (4) is seen in several different places. First of all, when the American (A) does not get the expected limited answer to his 'how are you?' he laughs on line 5 (somewhat nervously, since he is lost). Note that on line 5 he does not invite F to tell him more about the problem with the computer, which might have been the expectation on the part of F, because F pauses after having mentioned the problem with the computer. Since 'problems with computers' has been assigned to be the topic of the non-topical sequence, but A does not join in the development of this non-topical by, for instance, asking a question, F himself needs to develop the topic further, as if answering the hypothetical question 'Really, tell me what happened?' (6-8). On line 9, A is again given a chance to start elaborating on the non-topical, which he, again, does not do. He only asks 'Oh REALLY?' and since F is probably waiting to give him a chance

to participate in the development of the non-topical, F does not go on (line 10), and A needs to fill his turn, which he does by asking (line 11) "You have a big problem with your IBM?" (This is of course what F has just been telling.) Line 13 is no bigger contribution to the non-topical either, and hence F finds himself in a position where he needs to continue the development of the non-topical episode alone (lines 14-16). On line 17, A says only "O:h" and on line 22 he says "Oh N:O!" Until this, only one partner, F, has significantly developed the non-topical episode, and by now for A it seems that this episode has been stretched too long (and besides, it was an unexpected development for A in the first place). On the other hand, for F, the contribution by A must have seemed too small, and he may be expecting A to add something to the non-topical. A, however, is now more than ready for the business episode, and starts to bridge over to business on lines 26-27 by mentioning cars, the expected topic of the business episode. His bridging efforts are fruitless (F is not yet willing to start the business episode), and thus A on line 33 needs to directly initiate the business. Note that the initiation is framed explicitly with the emphatic "SO."

Even though non-topical elements do appear in native-speaker American business conversations as well as in the Finnish ones, they are characterized by mutual development of the topic, where both partners contribute relatively equally

turn-length-wise--a fact which could probably be regarded as an indicator of a 'healthy' non-topical episode. In example (4) several culturally-determined expectations were not fulfilled. The American interlocutor was expecting to receive a limited answer to his 'how are you?' and start the business soon after the opening episode. The Finnish speaker was expecting to be engaged in a lengthy, mutually constructed non-topical episode, and the 'how are you?' -question from his American business partner gave the Finnish speaker a formal permission to start building the non-topical before tackling the business. Since both partners needed each other, the business communication between these two people continued and flourished. The Finn, however, reported that, during telephone conversation with his American business partners he often felt that he needs to force the small talk. With his Finnish business partners the small talk was not forced, even though non-topical episodes or side-sequences before, during, and after business were very common. When you are playing by the same rules--organizing discourse according to mutual expectations--it feels that the conversation is flowing easily. Finding out more about others' (and our own) discourse conventions should facilitate this smooth flow of conversation in international encounters.

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